DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 298 CS 208 354

AUTHOR Feldman, Paula R.
TITLE Using Microcomputers for College Writing--What Students Say.
PUB DATE 25 Feb 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the Delaware Valley Writing Council and Villanova University's English Department (Villanova, PA, February 25, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; *Business English; *Course Evaluation; Higher Education; *Microcomputers; Revision (Written Composition); *Student Attitudes; Technical Writing; *Word Processing; *Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

Course evaluations of a business writing class that used the IBM personal computer with WordStar word processing software revealed students' enthusiasm for the microcomputer's word processing capabilities. A number of students commented on how much the computer simplified the processes of composing, revising, and editing. In addition to the speed and relative effortlessness of making corrections, word processing also made writing seem less messy and more efficient. Several students noted the microcomputer made them feel more relaxed about writing and more willing to take risks. Some students noticed that using the computer had an effect on their writing style. Almost immediately their writing became less stilted and labored and more conversational. Almost all of the students said they found themselves more willing to revise and edit their compositions on the computer than they had been before the course using conventional writing methods. One of the complaints mentioned involved the extra time required to complete an assignment. Others complained about the time restrictions on the computers--having to use them in the lab and only at certain designated hours. Despite these inconveniences, however, the students clearly felt the experience with word processing was worthwhile and many thought word processing should remain in the course. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED244298

Using Microcomputers for College Writing--What Students Say

Paula R. Feldman

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Paula R. Feldman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS208354

Using Microcomputers for College Writing--What Students Say

Paula R. Feldman
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

Word processing so significantly altered my students' attitudes, perceptions and writing habits that it transformed the process of composition into a qualitatively better, more rewarding experience for them. Their responses convinced me that microcomputers deserve an important place in our college writing programs.

Much research, of course, still needs to be done concerning the effect microcomputer word processing can have on the development of writing skills at various levels. We need to document and to measure with much greater precision the ways in which this tool can alter the writing process and to what degree. We need to study more closely its effect on such important skills as invention, organization, revision and editing. Pedagogical issues raised by the use of this technology need to be explored. But the accounts of students themselves are well worth considering. Their descriptions of the experience suggest areas and directions for further inquiry.

My students' assessments and insights are admittedly subjective, reflecting their perceptions rather than any objective measurement of skills learned. But it is no secret that students' attitudes and perceptions play a large part in how willing they are to work at acquiring greater writing proficiency. In my classes, I saw unaccomplished writers apply themselves to assignments on the computer with a gusto which surprised them as much as it delighted me. I also saw more sophisticated writers, who enrolled in the course planning to coast, discover with renewed enthusiasm how the computer could help them improve.

The student remarks reported here come from course evaluations completed anonymously on the last day of class in two business writing courses I taught using IBM personal computers with WordStar word processing software. One class, taught in the spring of 1983, had eight students and the other, taught in the fall of 1983, had fourteen. Since two semesters of freshman English were prerequisites, these students were, for the most part, working on strategy, revision, editing and style. With both groups, I was careful not to volunteer any specific opinions about how I thought using a microcomputer would affect their writing. I did, however, express a general enthusiasm for writing with the microcomputer and required students to use word processing for all assignments.

In the fall class, eight of fourteen students could touch type at the outset, but six could not. Ten had had some experience with computers before the course began but four had had none. Four reported they had been extremely apprehensive at the outset about the prospect of using computer word processing in the course, three said they had been moderately apprehensive, four said they had been a little bit apprehensive and three said they had not been apprehensive at all. So they were about evenly distributed along the apprehension scale from terrified to blase. Interestingly, extreme apprehensiveness did not correlate either with lack of previous computer experience or the inability to touch type. In fact, three of the four most apprehensive could both touch type and had had previous computer experience.

Once students had mastered the simple procedures for creating files, adding altering, deleting, moving and printing text, I left them pretty much to themselves to use the microcomputer's word processing capabilities as they saw fit to complete the course assignments. But I

was curious to find out at the end of the semester what differences they noticed between composing in longhand and composing on the microcomputer. One person observed, "I get brave on the computer because I know it's easy to change if I don't like it. Ideas are put down immediately so you don't lose your train of thought before the sentence is even finished." This ability of the computer to keep pace with mental processes impressed another student who noted, "There are many shortcuts to take to get to the finished product. In long hand, the writing takes the longest time and when you've finally written a sentence you forget what your next sentence should say. On the computer, you seem to fly through sentences and thinking seems much more clear." A number of students commented on how much the computer simplified the processes of composing, revising and editing. "It wasn't quite so hard to push a button to get rid of some paragraph or sentence that you didn't like so that it could be rewritten," remarked one. "The computer makes every aspect of writing simpler," said another. Only three of the fourteen reported that they couldn't see much difference between composing in longhand and on the microcomputer, while one reported that his longhand seemed to have been adversely affected.

In addition to the speed and relative effortlessness of making corrections, word processing also made writing seem less messy and more efficient. "When I revise a paper in longhand, I end up with a wastebasket full of paper," complained one student. Writing with a computer tends to be a more positive experience in part because wrong starts leave no litter to remind one of how many ideas didn't work out. Discarded ideas simply disappear from the screen. In addition, the drudgery of writing is reduced. As one student observed, "When writing in longhand, I have to re-copy several times. When composing on the compu-

ter, I can do my editing at the same time I am writing (composing)." Another student added, "...different ideas about your writing seem to come to your head much faster on the computer. The writing time is cut and it then leaves time to think."

While one student said he felt "a little rushed" using the microcomputer, it helped several others feel more relaxed about writing and more willing to take risks. As one student put it, "Things change more using the computer, even during the first draft. You can try different types of sentences[;] with longhand you wouldn't do that." I was struck by how often students tended to describe the experience of writing on a microcomputer in terms of play or power. For example, one student remarked, "I could do anything I wanted on it [the microcomputer], anytime--[it was] very flexible." Another explained, "Instead of just writing papers, we worked and played with them." Indeed, students seemed much more willing to experiment with language and phrasing, because much less was at stake if changes had to be made. One person in the spring group even found the computer cured writer's block. "Word processing," this person remarked, "helped take the mystery out of writing." Before the course, "I just couldn't think of the right way to express an idea I had. With the word processor, it didn't really matter how I said something. I could just type out my ideas however they came up and then I could revise and edit them so much more easily. Writing became fun. It wasn't a burden anymore."

I was eager to find out if, by the end of the course, students were still working from longhand drafts, notes or outlines. I had given them little guidance in developing a writing method except to encourage them to do as much as they could on the computer. Twelve out of fourteen students responded that at some time before the end of the course

they had come to compose directly on the computer without the aid of anything prepared on paper. Most (eight) reported that they could do this from between a few weeks to a month after being introduced to word processing. Two reported that they were working in this fashion within a week but one was not able to do it until almost the end of the course.

Several students noticed that using the computer had an effect on their writing style. One reported "I write in more detail on the computer" while another said, "Writing on [the] computer tends to be more terse." Most students' writing became almost immediately less stilted and labored, more conversational. One person observed, "I became more conscious of every word," and another noted, "I had more time to be creative and make changes. 'Nit Picky' things didn't slide by because it was so easy to change things."

Attitudes toward the process of polishing a draft altered significantly throughout both groups. Thirteen out of fourteen students in the fall group said they found themselves more willing to revise and edit their compositions on the computer than they had been before the course using conventional writing methods. Eliminating unnecessary words is not so painful a process as in longhand. With the press of a key, words can be eradicated. One student in the spring group explained, "In a college atmosphere the main concern is making sure the final draft gets done so you're willing to cut out some revisions to achieve this goal. With the computer I found I could spend more time rewriting because I knew I could make the corrections quickly and easily." The immediate positive reinforcement of being able to see a revision happen almost instantaneously on the screen has an inestimable value. Students no longer have to exercise their imaginations to visualize how a change that might formerly have had to be indicated with arrows, asterisks and

crossings out will finally look on the page. Seeing the revision in easily readable form allows the student to assess it with greater confidence and often to see the need for even further refinements. Retyping is almost never necessary on the computer even for major organizational changes. So, as one student observed, "No longer was writing and revising my papers a horror story. I think the final product was much better because I didn't mind making changes." Even though first drafts on the computer tended to be rougher than those written by conventional methods, the final compositions tended to be far more polished because of having gone through more intermediate drafts. Eleven out of fourteen students in the fall group said they thought using the computer definitely had a positive effect on the way the final product turned out. One was not sure and two believed there was no change.

Six students volunteered that they liked the way their printed output looked and several described what the computer produced as more "professional" looking. As one student put it, writing "Looked neater, more uniform on [the] computer. You can adjust the finished product to make it look better before printing unlike writing [it by hand] & hoping it will come out ok [in its typed form]." Often the latter method results in "having to redo [it] again & again." Or, as a student in the spring group remarked, the computer "enabled a one and two fingered typist like myself to produce neat professional looking reports and projects without spending hours and hours on one page." As a result, students seemed to take more pride in their efforts.

When asked how many times they revised an assignment on the computer before turning it in, twelve fall semester students responded with a specific number ranging from one to four times. On the average, students said they revised two and a half times using the computer. Five

students said they generally revised twice while three said they revised three or four times. A student who preferred not to indicate any specific number of revisions explained, "I revise as I go along. I'll write a paragraph, then read one and revise it." Another added, "I revised almost every sentence from what I originally wrote. As the letters (or whatever) started coming together, I'd rewrite the beginning part." "I thought about what I was writing more and changed more things," noticed another.

I asked students what they liked least about using the computer for composition. Six out of fourteen mentioned the extra time required, especially at first, and another three complained about the time restrictions on the computers--having to use them in the lab and only at certain designated hours. The computers were available sixty-seven hours a week, but students did not consider this enough time. At the beginning of the fall semester, there were only two computers for fourteen students to share, and there were complaints about having to wait for computers to be free. But after two more computers were installed, this problem disappeared. One student also had a physical problem with her eyes. Her pupils, once dilated, were not able to constrict enough to keep her from suffering eye strain after more than forty-five minutes in front of our green monitors. Despite these inconveniences, students clearly felt the experience with word processing was worthwhile.

When asked whether word processing should remain in the course in the future, my spring semester students were unanimous in their enthusiasm. "I think you'll find that it makes the course more interesting and people don't mind doing their work as much," noted one. "Writing papers on the [computer] ... made it easier, more interesting...more fun (and more involving)" remarked another. Seven of the eight also spon-

taneously volunteered that they thought it was beneficial for them to learn how to use word processing for reasons other than the immediate course work. The following remark is representative: "I think word processing is going to become a bigger and bigger part of our lives, not only at the office but at home as well....it's important we learn how to use [it]." Others thought the knowledge would help them start off their business careers with an advantage.

When the fall group was asked "If you had it to do all over again and could choose between two identical...classes [in business writing], one with word processing required and one without, which would you choose?," thirteen out of fourteen chose the one with word processing. Interestingly, students made this choice even though seven indicated that in doing assignments with the computer, they had ended up spending more time than they otherwise would have using conventional methods. While individual revisions could be achieved more quickly on the computer than in longhand, these students were willing to do more of them, often investing a larger total amount of time in an assignment. But they could see that the investment paid off in the much improved quality of the final product. And they realized that what they were achieving would have required a considerably longer time had they been using conventional means.

Late in the fall semester, one of my English Department colleagues, impressed by the essays submitted my Business Writing students in his Victorian Poetry class, noticed how these students were "newly intrigued by the writing and revision process." Their high grades in his course reflected their enthusiasm. Indeed, students reported that they used the microcomputer to complete written assignments for a variety of other classes.

Personally, I cannot imagine going back to teaching writing without the aid of microcomputers. But, like it or not, the time is fast approaching when we, as instructors, will no longer have a choice about whether our students will use word processing for their written assignments. Already, numbers of students are arriving on campus knowing some form of word processing or even with their own microcomputers in hand. There will be more of them, and they will demand to use their knowledge of this technology. Our challenge today, it seems to me, is to decide not whether students should use word processing but how most effectively to exploit this new resource in our teaching.